

Herakles, the Kerkopes, and Archilochos

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What do the hero Herakles, the mischievous Kerkopes, black-tailed eagles, and the oath-breaker Lykambes have in common? They all come together in the seventh-century B.C. poetry of Archilochos of Paros, who was supposed to marry Lykambes' daughter until the wedding was called off by the father of the bride. Archilochos' poetic revenge opens a window on early Greek society, and involves some unexpected applications of Greek mythology.

One of the more unusual stories about the mighty Herakles was that he was once enslaved to a foreign queen, Omphale of Lydia, as penance for a particularly foul murder. As her slave, she ordered him to deal with the pesky Kerkopes. These two brothers, archetypal juvenile delinquents, caused havoc in their neighbourhood. Their mother, despairing of exerting any kind of control over them, warned them one day to watch out for Blackrump (*melampygos*). They ignored this mysterious warning, as they had ignored all others. If anything, they thought she meant a black-tailed eagle (also *melampygos*); what danger could that possibly pose them?

One day they came upon Herakles asleep and tried to steal his weapons, but he caught them, and tied them by their ankles to a yoke. As he carried them along, upside down, they had a good view of his shaggy, sun-tanned posterior, and realized their mother's warning had come true. In some versions of the tale, they began to make lots of lewd jokes about what they were seeing. Herakles was so amused that he released them. In another version, they were turned into gibbering monkeys and set loose on Pithekoussai, 'Monkey Island' (modern Ischia).

Iambos: the poetry of attack

The Greeks told many stories about Herakles in a light-hearted vein: it was not all one heroic feat after another. This tradition is often on display in comedy, for instance in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, in which two innkeepers in the Underworld complain about how much food Herakles ate, and how he refused to pay his bill.

This more irreverent tradition was in fact much older, as we learn from the iambic poetry of the archaic period (seventh and sixth centuries B.C.). The *iambos* was a kind of verse that dealt in satire and invective; it was publicly performed and often aimed to cut prominent citizens down to size. Sometimes the *iambos* was good-natured but it could also be the vehicle of vicious attack. Or a bit of both — not unlike Aristophanes. The *iambos* is in fact a predecessor of Greek comedy.

Its most famous exponent was Archilochos of Paros, writing in the mid seventh century B.C. As it happens, 'watch out for the Blackrump' is a warning found also in his poetry. It seems, though, that he used it in a slightly different context: not Herakles, but the fable of the fox and the eagle. But the version about Herakles was probably known to his audience, and this would have added extra spice to Archilochos' telling of the tale.

The fox and the eagle

In the fable, the animals were friends at first, but one day when hungry the eagle dined on the vixen's cubs. The vixen looked up at the eagle in her lofty eyrie in grief and frustration, and called down oaths upon her head: the only weapon one has in such circumstances. 'Watch out for the Blackrump', she cried. The treacherous eagle was herself a *pygargos*, white-tailed, which our ancient sources say was another word for 'coward' (as *melampygos* was another word for 'brave' or 'manly'). So this eagle was not as powerful as she might like to think, and the fox warned her that she would one day meet her superior.

The *iambos* was used for public blam-

ing. In this case, we happen to know the name of Archilochos' target and why he was angry. It seems that a man called Lykambes had promised Archilochos his daughter in marriage, but then he broke his promise. It is always a mistake to get on the wrong side of a professional satirist. Archilochos used all his powers to name and shame Lykambes as an oath-breaker — a very serious offence in early Greece. He ridiculed his behaviour, and called his daughters' virtue into question (all of them). So powerful was his attack that, according to later tradition, the girls hanged themselves. Archilochos told the fable of the fox and eagle as part of this assault: with this poem he is warning Lykambes that his behaviour will not go unpunished, and that one day he will meet his superior. In fact, he already had. The reputation of Lykambes and his daughters has still not recovered.

Archilochos' audience would have enjoyed the witty way in which he effectively deploys two stories at once. He begins with the fable of the fox and eagle, but has the inspired idea of making the eagle the white-tailed variety, who will one day meet the stronger black-tailed species. This calls to mind the Kerkopes story, and invites one to draw further inferences: Lykambes is not only a white-tailed coward, he is as ridiculous as the ape-like Kerkopes. Archilochos himself becomes Herakles, the hyper-manly executor of summary justice. As surely as the arrogant and foolish Kerkopes were caught, so will Lykambes receive his just deserts.

Does Archilochos allude to the story of Herakles and the Kerkopes?

This is a pleasing result for understanding Archilochos' poem, but can we be sure that this was the story Archilochos had in mind in the poem, and that his audience knew the story of the Kerkopes? There are no certain answers to either question, but we can look at what is probable. By its nature, this playful story was certainly suited to the genre of *iambos* as a kind of comic entertainment: the story shows the lighter side of Herakles we have already mentioned; there are the lewd and ribald

jokes of the Kerkopes, and their reputation as scoundrels. In short, it is precisely the sort of story that would be at home in the repertoire of the iambic poet.

We are also told that a poem on the subject of the Kerkopes was attributed to Homer himself. Perhaps in general spirit it was like another poem attributed to Homer, the *Margites*, which contained the comic and embarrassing misadventures of a sexually innocent (and not too bright) young man. Both poems, though hardly by the author of the *Iliad*, circulated in the archaic period contemporary to Archilochos. Furthermore, there are pictures of the Kerkopes in Greek art beginning from the early sixth century, and found in widely separated parts of the Greek world. This evidence suggests strongly that the story would have been familiar to Archilochos' audience as well.

The Kerkopes – comic and phallic creatures

Other evidence is indirect, but lends further weight to the possibility that this is the story Archilochos had in mind. For instance, the Kerkopes are very well represented in comedy of the fifth and fourth centuries: they figure, aptly enough, in a play by Kratinos entitled *Archilochoi* ('Archilochos & Co.'), and whole plays called *Kerkopes* were written by Euboulos, Hermippos, and Plato (the comedian, not the philosopher). This makes it likely that they inherited the story from the pre-comic tradition. Very suggestive too is the name of the Kerkopes, which, crudely translated, means 'Dick-face'. *Kerkos*, 'tail', was colloquial for 'penis', as we know from Aristophanes and other comic writers. *Kerkos*-words were frequently used for dirty jokes in comedy. For instance, Sappho's husband was supposedly Kerkylas of Andros ('Dick from the Isle of Man'). Achilles while disguised among the maidens of Skyros went under the pseudonym 'Kerkouras'; one can imagine what a comic poet would do with such an idea...

The darker side of the Kerkopes story

All of these hints in the record suggest that the Kerkopes would have been available to Archilochos and his audience as a source of humour. It was a male chauvinist humour that sought to humiliate an opponent through sexual innuendo about him and the women in his family. The purpose of Archilochos' poem, indeed, was not benign. He was punishing a wrongdoer. There are hints also of a dark side to the Kerkopes which might be relevant here. In yet another version of the story, attested as early as the 460s B.C., the Kerkopes were said to have been punished by being turned to stone. Now petrification

is not a happy ending: it is associated with offences against gods or men in the stories of the Phaiacians in the *Odyssey*, Perseus and the Gorgon's head, Niobe and her children, and others. One authority refers to an attempt by the Kerkopes to deceive Zeus himself, and another alludes to actual combat between them. Another says their mother's name was Theia (Goddess) and that she was a daughter of Ocean; this is not the parent of creatures from the jolly world of folktale; her offspring in this version might have had the character of the monsters Herakles usually defeats. It would suit Archilochos well to hint also at villainous aspects of the Kerkopes: this connection would make Lykambes an object of both contempt and fear. As a danger to society, Archilochos suggests he should be banished from the community. Being worthless, he could be banished without compunction.

The fragmentary record of Greek literature and myth means that we are often obliged to be content with probable surmises about ancient realities. We can never be completely sure how many of these associations were present in the mind of Archilochos and his audience. It is clear, though, that the story of the Kerkopes, like other myths, was available for creative adaptation in many different contexts. With a little imagination we may hope to recover at least some of Greek myth's inexhaustible richness.

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